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MADAME DE STAËL AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF "L'ALLEMAGNE."

BY JOSEPH F. CHARLES,

Author of "Modern Thought and Modern Thinkers."

"Les grandes pensées viennent du cœur."

I.

NEVER were the words chosen for the motto of this essay more fully shown to be true than in the book which is its subject. The thought which they contain was once earnestly defended by Madame de Staël, whose own work was, in every case, the record of her experience. Her merest epitome of opinions other than her own, is rendered of permanent value by the living interest with which her touch invests it. To understand "L'Allemagne" we must look into the life of which it is almost unconsciously the expression; a knowledge of the biography of Madame de Staël must precede the study of her philosophy. As is so often the case with even the greatest of minds, her cradle supplied the mould in which her opinions were cast. She lived much in France, and had German blood in her veins, but she was intellectually neither French nor German. Born in Paris, but owing her true origin to that corner of the Lake of Geneva where Gibbon once had wooed her mother, and where, at Coppet, in later years, she found her home, she inherited those traditions of Protestantism which have made the social life of the Swiss so like the English. Her mother, the daughter of Pastor Curchod, brought into her nursery the severe moral tone, the reverence for the marriage tie, the austere belief in God, the lack of appreciation for the artistic and humorous sides of life, which are characteristic of the English middle class. Again and again in reading Madame de Staël one is reminded of Macaulay. With higher creative power, with, perhaps, a more brilliant imagination, she exhibits nearly all the qualities which

make him the typical Englishman in literature. Clinging, like him, loosely to the creed of her childhood, she showed the same passionate devotion to work. She had the same rare gift of conversation, the same love for the society of men and women. Like him she turned away from theoretical contemplation. Abstract thought, in itself, had no charm for her. Philosophy must be brought into the market-place and shown to be the rule of practical life before it could win her interest. Literature on its human, personal side was as much her chosen field of labour as it was that of Macaulay; her aims for the good of her fellows were as lofty, and her efforts alike in letters and in politics as unselfish as his. It was then what may be called the English side of her character that was the heritage of Madame de Staël from her mother. Her father, the famous Minister of Finance, Necker, whose good intentions paved the way to the Revolution, gave her less in mental endowments, but far more in the way of intimate affection. From first to last an unbroken love existed between father and daughter. He was her refuge in all the troubles of her storm-tossed life, and, when he died, with a mind almost unhinged by grief, she directed her prayers to him, as though he were present in spirit, to counsel and support his wayward child.

By a curious irony of fate, it was through his fault that she needed such an affection, for the husband whom he chose for her was totally unfit to guide the brilliant, restless, intellect committed to his charge. The great merit of the Baron von Staël-Holstein was that the King of Sweden guaranteed his position as ambassador in Paris, and thus prevented a separation of his bride from her old home. The wealth of Necker would have commanded any match, but religious difficulties narrowed the field of possible bridegrooms. No French Catholic could become a suitor, for it was not until four years after the marriage of Madame de Staël that, in 1788, the children of Protestants were rendered legitimate. Years afterwards, in thinking of the future of her own daughter, she exclaimed, "I will force her to make a marriage of affection," a cry which gave vent to the concentrated bitterness of a heartfelt sorrow.

Her own marriage was, in truth, the turning-point of the life of Madame de Staël. Hers was a soul created to love and to suffer. The devotion which she could neither offer nor claim at home was forced to seek its satisfaction restlessly abroad. The

Comte de Narbonne and Benjamin Constant were the objects of her most passionate affection, and her deepest disappointment. True always to her conception of the ideal home, in which strength on the part of the husband, and purity on the side of the wife, united to form a feeling which "should prolong itself right on to death, and renew itself in heaven;" she was doomed to life-long suffering. Baffled and beaten back upon herself in every outpouring of her affection, she has recorded her own passionate yearnings and dissatisfaction in the chapter of *L'Allemagne* "On Love in Marriage." There she has drawn the picture of a life where "the same impulse serves, so to speak, for the beatings of two hearts," in order to protest alike against the facility of divorce in the Germany of her day, and the French morality of the previous century, which had reduced marriage to "the requisite condition for the enjoyment of having children." She claimed, as so many moralists have claimed fruitlessly before and since, that the same fidelity should be exacted from the man as from the woman. The sufferings of the neglected wife have never been more powerfully treated. "There is," she exclaims, "in an unhappy marriage a force of anguish which leaves all the other pains of the world behind. The whole soul of a woman rests on conjugal attachment. To strive alone against your lot, to advance towards your coffin without a friend to be your stay, without a friend to regret your loss, is an isolation of which the deserts of Arabia give but a feeble idea. And, when the treasure of your youthful years has been given in vain, when you can no longer hope for the end of life the reflection of its earliest rays, when the twilight has nothing left which can recall the dawn, but comes, pale and discoloured, a livid spectre, the outrider of the night, your heart rises in revolt; you seem to have been robbed of the gifts of God upon earth."

In vivid contrast with this broken age is painted the young warrior whose forehead is adorned by "a ray of purity taken from the crown of holy virgins." Day by day he seems "to choose afresh her whom he loves. Nature has given him a freedom without bounds." The time of trouble, if it some day must come, is far away; "his horse can carry him to the end of the world."

Such was the dream of the writer of the unhappy loves of Delphine and Corinne, books which add to the self-revelation

of her soul. After the publication of the latter tragic love story, a keen critic declared that the problem was raised as to whether the very wealth of such an outpouring of affection did not preclude the possibility of its adequate return.* Were this the case, we should be reduced to the frigid creed that the less high we pitch our expectations, the happier we shall be. The question, however, really resolves itself into what constitutes happiness—self-indulgence, and a low form of self-satisfaction, the growth of the inner life, or the good of others. If placid contentment be our ideal of bliss, lukewarm attachments and interests will best serve our needs; but if the intensity of life be the measure of its perfection, and it be judged not by what it receives, but by what it gives, we can contemplate its very shipwreck with a kind of forlorn satisfaction. Madame de Staël did everything in excess; the cat-like purr of satisfaction over her own fireside could never have been hers. As in love, so in politics, the strength of her feeling led her into constant danger. In the Revolution she risked her life to save a friend. After the Revolution, she arose, a solitary figure, to oppose Napoleon.

Her attitude puzzled the usurper. "What does she want?" he once inquired. "It is not what I want," she said, when she heard of the question, "but what I think." It was intolerable to the Corsican that any one should think in his neighbourhood, and so he banished her from Paris, and thus indirectly became the cause of her two greatest works, "Corinne" and "L'Allemagne."

On the journey to Italy, of which "Corinne" was the result, we cannot dwell. The visit to Germany was, in those days, a rarer feat. Between the French and the German characters, then as now, a great gulf was fixed. As has been well remarked by the most laborious of the biographers of Madame de Staël, "it lay in the innermost essence of the French philosophy of the eighteenth century and of the French Revolution that its logical consequence was to seek a visible solution for the whole problem of progress."† In a sense, this is true of more countries and of more centuries. As Butler long ago remarked, in words which Cardinal Newman since has made his own, "Man is impatient, and for precipitating things." It is not, however, true of the

* Lady Blennerhasset, "Madame de Staël," Eng. trans., vol. iii. p. 333.

† *Ibid.*, vol. iii. p. 78.

Germany in which Goethe and Kant, and Fichte and Schelling were at work. These men looked before and after, seeing how

“On the roaring loom of time
The living garment of the Godhead still is wrought,”

a process which Madame de Staël was not fitted fully to comprehend. She came into the quiet domesticities of Weimar, her mind stored with memories of the luxurious follies of the court of Marie Antoinette, and the reckless dissipation of the mixed society which followed the Revolution. The contentment with which great thinkers lived on a pittance, the serene tranquillity with which they busied themselves with ideal contemplations amidst the ruins of political systems, filled her with admiration. A woman of the world, she knew far more of men and things than they, but she was ready to sit at their feet and learn their wisdom; a little too ready, indeed, for their complete satisfaction. Accustomed, like the gods of Lucretius, calmly to haunt

“The lucid interspace of world and world,”

they found the inquisitive mortal somewhat distracting who burst in upon them—plain indeed in face, and almost awkward in body, but with a torrent of speech, and eyes from which the great soul “not only flashed, but hurled fire and flame.”* Yet they made her welcome, then regarded her with curiosity, and expressed their opinions to each other with frankness. Goethe and Schiller took her up with something of the same indulgent wonder with which the giant in the fable allowed Tom Thumb to run about on the palm of his hand. The little creature, whose soul was filled with French politics, could not be expected to enter into the luminous conceptions of human destiny which were based upon a deep appreciation of Hellenic culture, and wrought out by the greatest intellects of the time. “Her nature, her feeling,” wrote Schiller to Goethe, “is better than her metaphysics, and her fine understanding rises to the rank of genius. She insists upon explaining everything, on seeing into it, measuring it; she allows nothing dark, inaccessible. Whithersoever her touch cannot throw its light, there nothing exists for her.”† One can imagine the smile with which Goethe would

* Werner. Quoted by Sainte-Beuve, “Portraits de Femmes: Madame de Staël.”
† Carlyle, “Miscellanies,” vol. ii. Appendix ii.

greet this way of precipitating things. He met her, admired what was admirable in her, and at a later date summed her up: “To philosophise in society means to talk with vivacity about insoluble problems. This was her peculiar pleasure and passion.”*

Unconscious, however, of the chasm between her mode of regarding the world and that of her hosts, she went intrepidly on, learning German, and gathering information from all sources. She came one day upon Fichte, who was then, as always, laboriously attempting to prove the universe to be a creation of the Ego or thinking self. Such a chance was not to be lost. Eagerly exclaiming that she had a quarter of an hour to spare, she asked him to explain his theory of the Ego.

The time was short, but perhaps struck by the obvious advantages of thus limiting the exposition of a German metaphysician, the philosopher began boldly enough. He had, however, mistaken his hearer; Madame de Staël could get at the heart of any system in less than a quarter of an hour. “Ah! I see,” she interrupted. “Your system is perfectly illustrated by a story in Baron Munchausen’s Travels. When the baron arrived once at the bank of a vast river, where there was neither bridge nor ferry, nor even a poor boat or raft, he was at first quite confounded, quite in despair; until at last, his wits coming to his assistance, he took a good hold of his own sleeve and jumped himself over to the other side. Now, Monsieur Fichte, this I take it, is what you have done with your *ich*, your *moi*.”† As he turned crestfallen away, the philosopher must have felt that, however great the Germans might be in pure thought, in wit they were somewhat behind the French.

It was nearly seven years after her first visit to Germany before Madame de Staël was ready to publish “L’Allemagne.” During the interval she worked hard at the language, and enjoyed the advantage of constant intercourse with A. W. Schlegel, who lived with her in the capacity of tutor to her sons. The book was printed at Paris in 1810, and was just about to make its appearance in the world, when all copies were seized by the police and destroyed. Its fault was that it was not French in spirit. It praised other countries, and showed a way to im-

* Carlyle, “Miscellanies,” vol. ii. Appendix ii., “Schiller, Goethe, and de Staël,” Appendix i., “Richter and de Staël” is worth attention.

† Lady Blennerhassett, “Madame de Staël,” vol. iii. pp. 81, 82.

provement through foreign influences. Its destruction closed, by a dramatic episode, the long duel between Madame de Staël and Napoleon, with the apparent victory of the latter.

Eighty years afterwards we look back upon his empire as a thing wholly passed, while the book remains a lasting power. "There are only two things in the world," said the Emperor, "the sword and the mind. By the mind I mean the spirit of religious and civil institutions. . . . In time the sword is always beaten by the mind." *

(To be continued.)

* Lady Blennerhasset, "Madame de Staël," vol. iii. p. 327.

A POINT OF SCHOOL HYGIENE.

BY JOHN JACKSON, F.E.I.S.

THE subject of postures in schools is one of such grave moment that it is advisable to draw the attention of parents to the question, which for several years now has engaged the powers of medical experts and teachers both in this and other countries. So many of our children, more particularly the weakly and delicate ones, emerged from school life with spines permanently or otherwise deformed, and with eyesight seriously injured, that both parents and teachers, but more especially surgeons and oculists, were roused, and not only roused but alarmed, so that investigations were at once instituted, which investigations have finally culminated in the latest pronouncement by the recent International Congress of Hygiene, held last August in London. I would here, in a *précis* of the paper which I had the honour of reading before the Congress, appeal to all readers of the *Parents' Review* on a matter which vitally concerns the rising generation, both as to their bodily health and their worldly prospects. The question of postures has naturally an almost exclusive reference to the positions assumed and taught in the writing class. So much work in school is done with the pen and pencil (sometimes as much as half or three-fifths) that the attitude which is maintained during these exercises becomes a potent force in the physical development of the children, and it is in connection with this branch of a school curriculum that the present paper has to do—"The Relation of Handwriting to Hygiene."

The ever-increasing employment and importance of handwriting is a cause of continual surprise. There is no occupation of life above the merely manual tasks of day-labourers into which writing does not enter. We cannot exaggerate its importance, notably in the departments of law, commerce, civil service, science, and individual as well as international correspondence. Strange to say, we find on inquiry, that the development of